

# The Colonial Conference and It's Functions.

With special reference to an Improved  
Means of Communication  
throughout the  
Empire.

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## THE COLONIAL CONFERENCE AND IT'S FUNCTIONS.

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**A**NOTHER Colonial Conference is about to assemble, and although few have any longer a feverish anxiety as to the outcome, yet many throughout the Empire will follow the proceedings with considerable interest. The furor of imperialistic sentiment which followed the South African war is steadily on the wane, and the motley collection of visionary schemes for consolidating the Empire which lately jostled each other before the footlights of the forensic and literary stage, are now playing with listless spirit to empty benches. Now, therefore, that the atmosphere has been somewhat clarified, and that so much of the impracticable has been demonstrated to be what it is, and not what it professed to be, it may be possible for some modest but real advance to be made towards a better understanding among the various factors of the British Empire.

While very little change has taken place, during the last century and a half, in the structure, and none whatever in the realization, of those periodically reinflated and regilded projects for federating the Empire, a very remarkable progress has been made in that time, towards the concrete development of a better understanding and more normal and harmonious relations between the different portions of the Empire. The more important sections, however, instead of moving towards federation have moved steadily in the opposite direction, in other words, towards a more self-governing and self-responsible status. But this movement, by bringing the chief factors of the Empire on to a common level, has at once diminished the attitude of suspicion with which the self-reliant colonial regarded the paternal administration of the mother country, and has equally mitigated the air of condescension with which the typical representative of the mother country regarded his colonial possessions.

It is to be noted that this responsible self-government on the part of the different portions of the Empire, is not primarily a feature of their relation to each other, but is essentially an expression of their domestic development which carries with it as an incidental though necessary feature, a change in their external relations to each other. Further, this development of

democratic self-government did not first arise in the colonies, but in Britain itself, whence it was copied into the colonies. The long struggle for responsible government in Canada was supported and encouraged entirely by the example of what was being realized in Britain, and it was the sympathy and co-operation of the radical reformers in Britain with their disciples and followers in the colonies which in the end secured for the latter the peaceable recognition of their right to self-government. The imperialist element, on the contrary, steadily maintained that to countenance such claims, or permit their realization, involved the dismemberment and ruin of the Empire. It was indeed just because the democratic reform element in Britain, in demanding responsible self-government for themselves, frankly favoured conceding it to the colonists as well, that they were branded as anti-imperialists and little-Englanders. However, they steadily argued that only through such concessions could the affection and respect of the colonies be fostered and retained. How completely their policy and predictions have been vindicated history records.

Now it is chiefly because the British type of responsible self-government is so thoroughly incorporated with the daily lives of the people, and has been carried to such an efficient stage of development, alike in the mother country and the more important colonies, that it is impossible to take seriously any imperial programme which does not fully recognize this central fact. It is necessary, therefore, to recall to mind what are the essential features of that type of government.

The central factor of the British type of democratic government, which is shared by all the self-governing colonies, is the cabinet system. And the essence of the cabinet system is that a body of men, who are to constitute the executive heads of the national administration and also to direct the national legislation and policy, are mutually selected from the representatives of the people in parliament, on the understanding that they agree to support each other, under a personal leader, in a comprehensive line of policy, and who, in support of that policy, must be able to command the assent of a majority of the representatives of the people in parliament. This interdependence of the members of a cabinet, with the necessity for a continuous support on all important measures by a majority of the popular representatives, is the essence of the party system. Cabinet government is therefore inseparable from the party system, and both in turn depend upon a close attention to public opinion, whatever its quality, since this

is the final court of appeal in all political matters. A cabinet government operating on this basis, and in which is concentrated at once efficient administration and definite responsibility, is the central and essential organ of British democracy, whether in its domestic affairs or external relations, be the latter imperial or foreign. Whether as practical politicians merely, or as statesmen also, whose political lives and national measures alike depend upon popular support, cabinet ministers must analyze and estimate and, as far as possible, create and guide public opinion as a condition of maintaining themselves in power.

When the responsible ministry of a self-governing portion of the Empire is called upon to consider propositions, such as may be presented at the Colonial Conference, which might commit them to a series of actions, or a line of policy which would limit their freedom within their own government, they will naturally be as cautious as they are wise. Their opinions, promises, and policy, as expressed at the Conference, must be passed upon and justified or condemned, not by the Empire at large, but by the parliament and people of the country which they represent. When, therefore, the late Government of the Mother Country, doubtless relying upon its continued predominance in the councils of the Empire, proposed to enlarge the sphere and develop the functions of the Colonial Conference, and suggested also a change of name which implied a more binding obligation for opinions expressed or proposals approved, the Canadian Ministry, with a wise appreciation of experience and an equally sagacious foresight, declined to acquiesce in the suggestions made. It is true that the innovations proposed were very modest in extent, but it was the change of direction which naturally gave pause. "A Conference," they say, "is a more or less unconventional gathering for informal discussion of public questions, continued, it may be, from time to time, as circumstances external to itself may render expedient, but possessing no faculty or power of binding action. \* \* \* \* \* The term 'Council,' on the other hand, indicates a more formal assemblage possessing an advisory and deliberative character, and, in conjunction with the word 'Imperial,' suggests a permanent institution which, endowed with a continuous life, might eventually come to be regarded as an encroachment upon the full measure of autonomous legislative and administrative power now enjoyed by all the self-governing colonies." As announced by the Premier in the House, this is still the attitude of the Canadian Ministry towards the Colonial Conference. That it is an eminently

wise attitude and ultimately in the interest of every section of the Empire, Britain itself included, is evident from what we have seen to be the essential character of a responsible ministry of the British type.

It will be observed that the Canadian reply to Lord Lyttelton's proposals makes no objection whatever to the free and informal discussion of any public questions that may be of interest either to the Empire as a whole, or to any groups of powers within it. And, indeed, where there is no "binding action" implied, the discussion of such questions may take a far wider range, may clear up many difficulties, may reveal and clarify common interests, and suggest the expediency of common action; may even lead to the suggestion of terms capable of being agreed upon between the parties, when sanctioned in their respective parliaments. But such a Conference is no place for the giving or exchanging of definite pledges, or for the formal sanctioning of any proposals or binding agreements. Nothing can be regarded as more than a tentative proposal until brought before the respective parliaments of the sections of the Empire which are interested, and whose sanction or adherence is required. If accepted by these free governments, and thus made a feature of their own policy, the proposals will become effective under the conditions recorded. Under these conditions each party to the agreement is responsible for it and retains control over its operation and amendment. Thus no majority made up from other portions of the Empire has the power to impose distasteful terms or conditions upon any distinct section of it.

In a Colonial Conference having neither legislative nor executive powers, there is this further advantage, that not only may the greatest freedom and range of discussion take place as to matters of mutual interest to all or any portion of the Empire, but all forms of government within the Empire may send representatives to the Conference. Tentative proposals may be discussed which on one subject may appeal to all portions of the Empire, while on another they may interest only those having responsible self-government, or only the crown colonies. On still other matters it would permit of discussing interests as between a self-governing country, a crown colony and even a protectorate. All this is rendered possible because in no case is any resulting agreement to be determined, ratified, or executed by any superior central power, which indeed would be impossible as combining such diverse forms of government, but is ratified

and carried out by the existing domestic government of each party to the agreement, be it autocratic or democratic, nominated or representative, responsible to the home government or to the people of the colony.

If the Colonial Conference cannot be regarded as paving the way for a curtailment of the liberties of the self-governing colonies, but can only discuss and clarify matters of common interest, some of which the respective governments represented at the Conference may see fit to take up, each in its own way, and in so doing must have constant regard to the public opinion of their respective countries, then the development of a better understanding and a more intimate realization of what may or may not be attempted in the way of promoting mutual interests, must entirely depend upon the insight and information regarding the various parts of the Empire which is diffused throughout each portion of it, and more particularly the self-governing sections of it. Thus one of the most urgent features in any programme for the improvement of intra-imperial relations, is that of facilitating and encouraging a free interchange of ideas and information between the different portions of the Empire. Among democratic and self-governing peoples all efforts towards bringing the different portions of the Empire into closer touch with each other must be founded upon this.

One of the most significant developments in the civilized world to-day is the rapid growth of an effective international public opinion. When we see the conditions of this very interesting development, we observe that it arises almost entirely from the rapidly increasing facilities and organs for the interchange of ideas, the discussion of mutually interesting matters, and the diffusion of reliable and detailed information as to the activities of the chief civilized nations.

The growing desire for increased knowledge of each other by the various parts of the British Empire is simply an expression of this world movement, but there are special reasons why a greater and more intimate acquaintance should be developed. While nothing could more effectually defeat its own purpose than an effort to force the people of the different sections of the Empire into artificial and restrictive connections with each other, yet, on the other hand, nothing could more effectively promote closer friendly and permanent relations than the diffusion of a more perfect knowledge of each other's general conditions, needs, and aspirations. Such enlightened relations can only be adequately

secured by means of the most perfect modern facilities for inter-communication. Hence, among the most urgent and fundamental of the subjects which may present themselves for discussion at the coming Conference, are those of transportation, postal, and electric cable facilities,—the latter in a special degree. The most practical and effective direction of sound imperial development has been indicated by a well known public-spirited citizen at once of the Dominion and the Empire, whose views extensively set forth\* have gained the support of many of the most eminent men in Canada, and quite recently have been widely promulgated by one of the most influential political associations in the United Kingdom.† This matter, as is well known, has occupied years of labour, and although the fruits may appear to some impatient and less practical spirits as somewhat slow in maturing, it must not be forgotten that the spanning of the Pacific by a submarine telegraph has been a direct outcome of these efforts, and that this first result forms no inconsiderable portion of the whole circle of Imperial cables advocated. Moreover, as exemplified in the case of Imperial penny postage, tardiness in complete development is quite frequently a feature in matters of the most lasting importance.

Since public opinion is the fundamental and most important factor in determining all great matters in democracies, there can be few interests which the public opinion of the Empire should have more at heart than that of improving its own intelligence. Let us hope, therefore, that members of the Colonial Conference will devote attention to this most elemental of all needs.

\* *Vide* Letter to the Earl of Elgin, Secretary of State for the Colonies, by Sir Sandford Fleming, and other documents; e.g. Sessional Paper No. 67, Canada, 1906.

† In a pamphlet on the Establishment of a great Imperial Intelligence Union as a means of promoting the wellbeing of the Empire; issued under the auspices of the Eighty Club.

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